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An Irish family's Journey Unlocks White House Door From Cooley Pen. to Penn. Ave.

By Dr. John McCavitt

Like so many people around the world I watched the U.S. presidential election with considerable interest. It was piqued further when I noticed the Irish genealogical findings of Megan Smolenyak about Vice President Biden.

Some of his ancestors emigrated on two vessels to New York during the Great Hunger from their home in the Cooley Peninsula in County Louth - just across Carlingford Lough from where I live in County Down.

As fate would have it, some twenty-five years ago I compiled a database of over 5,000 people who emigrated direct from Newry, County Down to New York between 1845 and 1850. I knew they would feature on the passenger lists of both vessels. It was just a matter of finding the database.

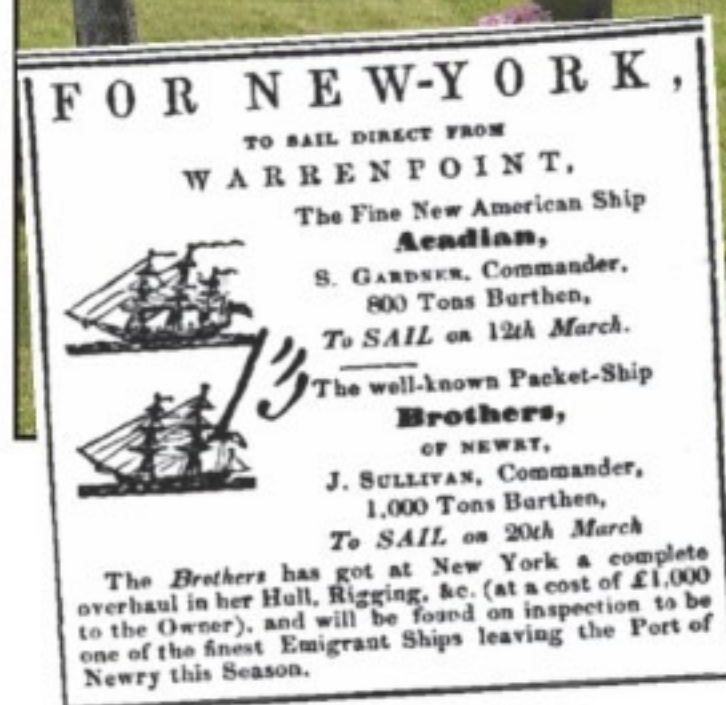
Locating it, I had recorded that Joe Biden's great, great Grandfather, "Owen Finnigan" emigrated on board the Brothers on 31 May, 1849 and that he was a "locksmith."

Just to be sure I consulted the original passenger list records again and confirmed it. So, a locksmith from County Louth emigrated from poverty stricken Ireland, unlocking the door to the White House for one of his descendants. An Irish twist on the familiar theme, log cabin to White House.

Owen Finnigan was one of 200 people who sailed on the Brothers, 1000 tons. In those days the port of Newry had very considerable connections with North America. Before the completion of sea locks which facilitated larger ships sailing to and from it on the canal, the oldest summit level waterway in Great Britain



Then Vice President Joe Biden and Fr. Malachy Conlon at the Finnegan family grave in Templeton, County Louth, June 25, 2016. PHOTO BY SAM BOAL ROLLINGNEWS.IE.



Newspaper ad for the sailing of the Brothers.

and Ireland, bigger vessels departed from its satellite port of Warrenpoint.

The Finnigans would have had to travel along the southern shore of Carlingford Lough and then catch a ferry across to the northern shore at picturesque Narrow Water, before proceeding to the dock which still exists at

nearby Warrenpoint. It was reputedly built by French prisoners of war from the days of Napoleon.

Their journey across Narrow Water and departure from Warrenpoint have a contemporary as well as historical relevance. The long mooted bridge at Narrow Water looks like it is going to eventually be realized, the first cross border bridge to be built since partition.

The Brothers, under the command of Captain Sullivan, with Owen on board, sailed from Warrenpoint on 10th April

1849, arriving in New York on 31st May. Passengers publicly thanked Captain Sullivan "for his unceasing kindness and attention to us since we left our native shore."

The Brothers arrived two days after the Seraphine (241 passengers), also from Warrenpoint. It had sailed ten days later than the Brothers. Such were the vagaries, and often the dangers, of transatlantic travel. Better to arrive later than not at all.

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Among the first wave of vessels leaving Warrenpoint that spring, the Hannah sailed for Quebec with 12 crew and 176 passengers. It struck ice in the Gulf of St Lawrence on 29th April. Survivors clambered on the ice. Fifty-five people lost their lives, either drowned or frozen to death.

The following year, 1850, Owen's wife Jane "Finigan" and children, including James aged 7, great grandfather of Joe Biden, made the same journey to Warrenpoint. Traveling too was his brother

Patrick, not yet one-year-old. There they boarded the Marchioness of Bute, 1,500 tons, the second vessel to depart for New York that year.

Scheduled to sail on 1st March, severe gales not only buffeted the ship when it arrived in Carlingford Lough, but bad weather delayed its departure until 18th March. The Marchioness of Bute, with 346 passengers on board, arrived in New York on 15th May. Again, better to arrive safely than not at all.

Just as well they were not on the first vessel to depart from Warrenpoint to New York that year, the Sarah Parker. Eleven one-year-old children died en route.



The ferry at Narrow Water about 20 years after the Finnegan's crossed on it.

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In sailing from Warrenpoint, Biden's ancestors would have sailed past the Ross monument on the County Down shore of Carlingford Lough, a 100-foot obelisk dedicated to Major General Robert Ross from Rostrevor, the man who captured Washington and burnt the White House and Capitol in 1814. Almost two centuries later, when President Mary McAleese, a resident of Rostrevor at the time of her election, visited President Clinton he quipped that the last person from Rostrevor who came to the White House burnt it.

Visiting relatives in the Carlingford area in much happier times in 2016, then Vice President Biden described it as "Heaven." Little wonder. The stunning local scenery inspired C.S. Lewis' Narnia. In 1842 the English writer, William Makepeace Thackeray, put it best when he remarked of Carlingford Lough "were such a bay lying upon English shores, it would be a world's wonder".

Dr John McCavitt, is co-author with Christopher T. George of "The Man who captured Washington, Major General Robert Ross and the War of 1812," Uni-

versity of Oklahoma Press. He is currently co-authoring a book with Kevin Chambers about the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 which featured huge numbers of Irish on both sides.

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